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Philosophy of Kuki Shūzō and Ethics of Watsuji Tetsurō: Japanese Philosophers' Responses to Modern Individualism

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1. Kuki Shūzō and Watsuji Tetsurō: Modern Japanese Philosophers

Kuki Shūzō 九鬼周造 (1888–1941) and Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎 (1889–1960) are representative philosophers of the early Shōwa era; both were students at First Higher School¹ and Tokyo Imperial University, and taught at Kyoto Imperial University. They studied Western and Japanese philosophy (e.g. Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger, and Nishida) and traditional Japanese culture. However, they present extremely different ideologies. Kuki advocates philosophy of contingency 偶然性, which is based on the isolated individual. He focuses on how an individual meets another individual. Watsuji believes in the ethics of *aidagara* 間柄, which stem from human relations, social relationships, and environmental factors. Thus, their understanding of human beings differs: Kuki believes that human beings are characteristically solitary in the world, whereas Watsuji opines that human beings live in networks since the beginning. This paper addresses the following question: Despite sharing the same educational background and literary influences, why do Kuki and Watsuji present different ideologies?

2. The Path to Japanese Philosophy: The Introduction of Modern Individualism

Western philosophy was imported into Japan after the Meiji Restoration. Concepts such as “individual”, “the absolute”, “subject”, “object”, and “the relationships between human beings” have been derived from Western philosophy. Therefore, we can consider the philosophers who discussed these concepts to be under the influence of Western philosophy. Such philosophers can be identified by comparing their philosophies with those of the West. However, I believe that it is important to consider the philosophers' own perspectives to

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understand their philosophies. The acceptance of Western philosophy in the Japanese context requires the development of a language to discuss the abovementioned philosophical concepts. Previous studies have highlighted the significant contribution of Nishi Amane 西周 (1829–1897), who translated Western philosophical terms into Japanese (e.g. philosophy into *tetsugaku* 哲学).² Although introducing Western philosophical concepts into Japanese was a momentous achievement, an introduction alone was not sufficient for contemplating highly advanced philosophy. Therefore, the Japanese people had to get accustomed to Western philosophical ideas and develop a new writing style that expressed Western-style philosophy in Japanese. Japanese novelists played a crucial role in this developmental process.

Some Japanese novelists during the Meiji period, such as Yamada Bimyo 山田美妙 (1868–1910) and Futabatei Shimei 二葉亭四迷 (1864–1909), began a movement to unify the written and spoken styles of the Japanese language, thereby developing a new style of writing called “*genbun’icchitai*” 言文一致体 to appropriately describe people’s psychological state and provide a first-person perspective.³ Thus, the Japanese language acquired the style of expression using the “I” (i.e., first-person perspective).⁴ Modern Japanese novelists have adopted this style to build the modern individual who is introverted and has trouble understanding the second person’s perspective.⁵ The works of these novelists have familiarized Japanese people with the Western concepts of “individual”, “subject”, “object”, and “the relationships between human beings”. Influenced by the novelists, both Kuki and Watsuji have adopted the *genbun’icchitai* writing style in their philosophy books. Thus, modern Japanese novelists facilitated the expansion of modern Japanese philosophy. Therefore, it is important to not only understand the thinking of modern Japanese novelists but also examine their influence on philosophers.

In this paper, I will focus on the novels of Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石 (1867–1916), particularly *Sanshirō* 三四郎, and their criticism. Sōseki wrote his novels after the

² Ōhashi Ryosuke 大橋良介, *Nihontekinamono, Yōroppatekinamono* 日本的なもののヨーロッパ的なものの, Kodansha 講談社, 2009, pp. 39–62.

³ Nomura Takeshi 野村剛史, *Nihongo Sutandādo no Rekishi –Miyakokotoba kara Genbun’icchi made* 日本語スタンダードの歴史—ミヤコ言葉から言文一致まで, Iwanamishoten 岩波書店, 2013, pp. 229–268.

⁴ Andō Hiroshi 安藤宏, “*Watashi*” *wo Tsukuru Kindai Shōsetsu no Kokoromi* 「私」をつくる 近代小説の試み, Iwanamishoten 岩波書店, 2015.

⁵ Karatani Kōjin 柄谷行人, *Teihon Nihon Kindai Bungaku no Kigen* 定本 日本近代文学の起源, Iwanamishoten 岩波書店, 2008, p. 28.

genbun'icchitai writing style had been firmly established. In his novels, he identifies the problem of the modern individual; he describes modern Japanese intellectuals and the collapse of the community. Both Kuki and Watsuji were familiar with the works of Sōseki. In particular, Watsuji often attended Mokuyō-kai 木曜会, visiting Sōseki on Thursdays. Furthermore, Sanshirō, the protagonist in *Sanshirō*, belongs to the same generation as Kuki and Watsuji; thus, Sōseki provides a description of the intellectual figures in that generation. In the subsequent sections, I will examine the criticism surrounding Sōseki's novels as well as the thought in *Sanshirō* to understand both Kuki's philosophy and Watsuji's ethics.

3. *Sanshirō* and City Dwellers: Absence of concrete self

Sanshirō was published as a serialized novel in Asahi Shimbun, a popular Japanese newspaper, from September 1 through December 29 of 1908 (Meiji 41). The novel is set in Tokyo Imperial University around 1907 (Meiji 40). The 23-year-old protagonist, Sanshirō, is attending Tokyo Imperial University after finishing Fifth High School⁶ in Kumamoto. Since both Kuki and Watsuji entered the same university in 1909 (Meiji 42), Sanshirō is their senior by two years. Sanshirō is a naïve young man who experiences difficulties in getting accustomed to the city of Tokyo that both surprises and confuses him. In the preface, Sōseki describes Sanshirō as follows.

Sanshirō, a high school graduate from a rural area, enters Tokyo Imperial University and experiences a new atmosphere. Then, he meets his classmates, seniors, and young ladies and tries many things. All I have to do is leave the characters in this atmosphere. After that, they act by themselves, resulting in certain events. I believe that gradually, both you and I will get a sense of the atmosphere and the characters. If this atmosphere and these characters are not interesting, we can do nothing but accept our bad luck. This novel is very realistic. I cannot write fantasy.⁷

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⁷ 「田舎の高等学校を卒業して東京の大学に這入った三四郎が新しい空気に触れる、さうして同輩だの先輩だの若い女だのに接触して色々に動いて来る、手間は此空気のうちに是等の人間を放す丈である、あとは人間が勝手に泳いで、自ら波瀾が出来るだらうと思ふ、さうかうしてゐるうちに読者も作者も此空気にかぶれて是等の人間を知る様になる事と信ずる、もしかぶれ甲斐のしない空気で、知り栄のしない人間であつたら御互に不運と諦めるより仕方がない、たゞ尋常である、摩訶不思議は書けない。」

Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石, *Sōseki Zenshū* 漱石全集 16, Iwanamishoten 岩波書店, 1993–2004, p. 252

Sōseki states that he describes the atmosphere at the university, defines the characters, and leaves them in the atmosphere, and subsequently the novel advances. He claims that this novel is realistic. Therefore, if Sōseki's claim is to be believed, *Sanshirō* provides the actual description of the atmosphere in Tokyo Imperial University at around 1907 (Meiji 40), thereby revealing the background to Kuki's and Watsuji's thinking.

However, what is the atmosphere in *Sanshirō*? As many critics have highlighted, it is an urban atmosphere. Since Sōseki's protagonist is a 23-year-old man from a village, his perspective emphasizes the difference between the countryside and the city. Although Sōseki presents many aspects of the city, this paper focused on the most important one highlighted by Ishihara Chiaki 石原千秋: city dwellers do not belong to any home province, or in other words, they are abstract people.⁸ According to him, *Sanshirō* is a story of how the protagonist becomes a part of the abstract people by acquiring Western knowledge. Similarly, Azuma Hiroki 東浩紀 describes the urban atmosphere and *Sanshirō*'s classmate and love interest Mineko as follows: "city life and Mineko did not have a true self since the beginning"⁹ Thus, both critics have asserted that city inhabitants lack a real concrete self.

In this paper, I will examine Azuma's argument because it is more helpful for understanding the discussions of Kuki and Watsuji. According to Azuma, city inhabitants only have an outside (i.e., actions in social situations) and not an inside (i.e., a concrete mind that unites their self and situation). In the novel, *Sanshirō* tries to find the inner life of Mineko. She has no true self separate from social situations; the meaning of her actions is determined by the social situation, not by her inner self. However, *Sanshirō* cannot understand either the situation or Mineko's actions because he is a young man from a village and does not possess the ability to understand city inhabitants; consequently, he broods over whether she loves him or not. Moreover, he would not have understood her inner life even if he had been familiar with the city; she would have simply remained ambiguous to him, causing him to suppress his affection toward her. Azuma interprets the dynamic between *Sanshirō* and Mineko using the

(Translation by the author, emphasis added).

⁸ Ishihara Chiaki 石原千秋, *Sōseki to Nihon no Kindai first and second volume* 漱石と日本の近代上・下, Shinchōsha 新潮社, 2016, Vol. 1, pp. 155–193.

⁹ Azuma Hiroki 東浩紀, "Shaseibuntekininshiki to Ren'ai" 写生文的認識と恋愛, *Yūbintekifuntachi Azuma Hiroki Akaibusu 1* 郵便の不安たち 東浩紀アーカイブス 1, Kawadeshoboushinsha 河出書房新社, 2011, p. 149.

concept of polyphony proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin. Azuma understands polyphony as the ambiguity of utterance. Utterance is constituted by words that are not only personal but also social. It occupies a space of multiplicity, and even the utterer cannot find a consistent inner life. Azuma describes the perception of Sōseki by using this concept. He calls it “the perception of sketch-like writing” 写生文の認識 according to Sōseki’s use of the term “sketch-like writing.” Azuma suggests that Sōseki sketches these polyphonic situations in *Sanshirō*. Such situations pose a challenge to the modern individual, whose sense of self has been formed by the perception of *genbun’icchitai*.¹⁰

Based on the preceding arguments, Azuma concludes that in *Sanshirō*, Sōseki is simply describing a polyphonic situation. However, Sōseki’s post-*Sanshirō* works are love stories in which he expresses that love in the modern city must be based on the will of individuals; individual will must be free from social situations. Thus, love stories demand inner lives of characters. But it is impossible to describe love in one’s heart by sketch-like writing. Therefore, Sōseki adopts a new style of writing in *Sorekara* それから. He does not abandon the perception of sketch-like writing, but it becomes more complicated. *Sorekara* is written using both polyphonic and monophonic words. Monophonic words sweep away the ambiguity by force and determine the consistent will of the characters. Modern individuals are demanded to use both polyphonic words and monophonic words in the perception of sketch-like writing. They have to understand polyphonic situations and form their actions according to their consistent will.¹¹ The problem of modern individuals is such that they find themselves in polyphonic situations, but are forced to base their actions on a consistent will, and thus it becomes impossible to understand others.

Thus, Azuma’s discussion elucidates the problem faced by modern individuals in their relationships with others. Kuki and Watsuji proposed the following solutions to the problem.

4. Two Types of Being: “There-be being” and “S-be being”¹²

To understand the difference between Kuki’s and Watsuji’s interpretation of being, it is crucial to understand Watsuji’s classification of being into “There-be being” and “S-be

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 153-161.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 161-175.

¹² “There-be being” is 「がある存在」. “S-be being” is 「である存在」.

being”,¹³ because Kuki’s counter-argument is based on this classification.¹⁴ “There-be being” suggests that a precise “*mono* もの (thing)” exists; it is expressed using “There-be” sentences such as “There is a pen.” “S-be being” represents a “*koto* こと (matter)”, which is an attribute that defines the individual (e.g., father, old, or round); it is expressed using “S-be” sentences such as “He is a father of two children.” According to Kuki, “There-be” being presents the existence of being in a narrow sense and “S-be” being presents the essence of being.¹⁵ Apparently, Kuki identifies Watsuji’s distinction with the discussion of Henry of Ghent (Henricus Gandavensis): “*esse essentiae*” and “*esse existentiae*.” “There-be” being is fragile and can change; it will easily disappear sooner or later. “S-be” being neither changes nor disappears; it is universal. Thus, Watsuji believes that “S-be” being is more important, whereas Kuki argues that “There-be being” is more important.

5. Ethics of *Aidagara*: Watsuji Tetsurō’s response

Watsuji begins his main work, *Ethics (Rinrigaku)*, as follows:

The essential significance of the attempt to describe ethics as the study of *ningen* [humanity] consists in getting away from the misconception, prevalent in the modern world, that conceives of ethics as a problem of individual consciousness only. This misconception is based on the individualistic conception of a human being inherent in the modern world. The understanding of the individual is itself, as such, an achievement of the modern spirit and bears an importance that we must never be allowed to forget. However, individualism attempts to consider the notion of the individual that constitutes only one moment of human existence and then substitutes it for the notion of the totality *ningen*. This abstraction is the origin of many sorts of misconception. This standpoint of the isolated ego, which constitutes the starting point

¹³ Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎, “Rinrigaku—Ningen no Gaku toshiteno Rinrigaku no Igi Oyobi Houhou” 倫理学—人間の学としての倫理学の意義及び方法, Karube Tadashi 荻部直 ed. *Shokou Rinrigaku* 初稿 倫理学, Chikumashobō 筑摩書房, 2017, pp. 57–58, pp. 123–142.

¹⁴ Kuki Shūzō, *Kuki Shūzō Zenshū* 九鬼周造全集 3, Iwanamishoten 岩波書店, 1980–1982, pp. 59–75.

¹⁵ According to Watsuji, “S-be being” disappears when humans die because of *aidagara* among human beings. However, I argue that Kuki disagrees with Watsuji as he defines “S-be being” using a triangle.

of modern philosophy, is merely one such example.¹⁶

The locus of ethical problems lies not in the consciousness of the isolated individual, but precisely in the in-between [*aidagara*¹⁷] of person and person.¹⁸

Since the beginning, Watsuji denies modern individualism, particularly the isolated ego. Sōseki primarily focuses on individualism and the isolated ego; thus, Watsuji's intention might have been to tackle and resolve the problem of his teacher.

According to Watsuji, human beings are part of a social network, and the concept of an isolated modern individual is irrational. His study of the Japanese language and the history of philosophy reveals that in Japanese, *sonzai* 存在 (being) means the awareness of oneself as part of a network.¹⁹ As mentioned previously, Watsuji believes that “S-be being” is the foundation of the concept of being. He primarily advocates for the existence of society; the individual appears as a negation of society, which subsequently negates the individual. He thinks that the principle of the human beings is *Śūnyatā* 空; in other words, the absolute negation. The individual negates itself and the whole appears. Then, the individual negates the whole and the individual appears. Watsuji thinks that the social is this movement of the dual negation or *Śūnyatā*.²⁰ Human beings are formed by society, which is formed according to history and climate (*fūdo* 風土).²¹ Human beings develop society over time, and are subsequently reformed by it. Therefore, the ethics of *aidagara* are the laws of social existence and the foundation of philosophy. Based on this theory, he provides a detailed description of the rules of (mainly) Japanese society. In his opinion, the foundation of ethics and philosophy can be understood by examining *aidagara*, formed on the basis of history and climate. However, there are few descriptions about the situations in which the individual negates the whole; in other words, Watsuji rarely writes about the situations where the individual becomes

¹⁶ Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎, *Watsuji Tetsurō Zenshū* 和辻哲郎全集 10, Iwanamishoten 岩波書店, 1961–1992, p. 11. (Watsuji Tetsurō's *Rinrigaku*, translated by Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 9.)

¹⁷ My personal supplement.

¹⁸ Watsuji 和辻, op. cit., p.12. (Translated by Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter, op. cit., p. 10)

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 24–25.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 25–27, 123–125.

²¹ Watsuji points out that the climate (*Fūdo* 風土) is one of the structural moment of human beings (Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎, *Watsuji Tetsurō Zenshū* 和辻哲郎全集 8, Iwanamishoten 岩波書店, 1961–1992, p. 1).

estranged from the society. Although Watsuji provides detailed descriptions of various *aidagara* in the final half of *Ethics* and his other works, they serve as restrictions on an individual; in other words, they are static and holistic.

Sōseki and Azuma asserted that city inhabitants only have an outside and not an inside with no true self separate from social situations. Such an idea is supported by modern individualists, but rejected by Watsuji. His assertion that social situations are the essence of human beings confirms his approval of social structure. Although he comprehensively examines *aidagara*, it is difficult to determine whether his description of *aidagara* reduces the polyphonic social situation to a monophonic social role. There are no problems of the modern individuals, but I think that this answer is too repressive to the individual.

6. Philosophy of Contingency: Kuki Shūzō's response

Kuki's masterpiece, *The Problem of Contingency*, begins with the following lines:

Contingency is the negation of necessity. Necessity means that it must be so; namely, being contains its foundations within itself in some way. Contingency means that it happens to be so, and being contains insufficient foundations within itself; namely, being contains negation, or being could be nothing. In other words, contingency is formed when we find being contains an internal relation with non-being. Contingency is extreme being that stands on the interface of being and nothing. It is a state in which being is based on nothing, or a figure in which nothing invades being.²²

Watsuji tries to resolve the problem of Sōseki and rejects modern individualism. However, Kuki embraces the modern individualism of Sōseki, since, as previously stated, he believes in the importance of "There-be being", or existence. According to him, philosophy began from

²² 「偶然性とは必然性の否定である。必然とは必ず然か有ることを意味している。すなわち、存在が何等かの意味で自己のうちに根拠を有っていることである。偶然とは偶々然か有るの意で、存在が自己のうちに十分の根拠を有っていないことである。すなわち、否定を含んだ存在、無いことの出来る存在である。換言すれば、偶然性とは存在にあって非存在との不離の内的関係が目撃されているときに成立するものである。有と無との接触面に介在する極限的存在である。有が無に根ざしている状態、無が有を侵している形象である。」

Kuki Shūzō, *Kuki Shūzō Zenshū* 九鬼周造全集 2, Iwanamishoten 岩波書店, 1980-1982, p. 9 (Translated by the author).

an isolated individual.²³ He rejects the idea that “S-be being”, or *aidagara*, comes first. The foundations of his philosophy are the immediate, namely the now, here, and I, which share the common characteristic of fragility. Therefore, he focuses on studying the philosophy of contingency.

Kuki argues that although human beings exist, they lack essence. Therefore, it is evident that Sōseki, Azuma, and Kuki share a similar view of human beings: everything appears ambiguous because it does not have stable foundations. Modern individualists must force these polyphonic situations to fit inside their monophonic perspectives. As previously mentioned, the process of attaching a fixed meaning entails violence; Kuki is aware of this problem and describes the role of individuals as follows.

The internalization by the law of identity must be concrete, restricted by the contingency of thou who I meet as the facts.²⁴

On meeting others unexpectedly, an isolated I must gather all its strength to struggle and experience happiness in internalizing others deep within itself.²⁵

According to Kuki, polyphonic diversity and monophonic perception must be balanced. Kuki emphasizes social interaction and escape from solitude; he asserts that interaction facilitates the development of a concrete inner self. Therefore, he prefers accidental meetings 邂逅 to formal relationships. He views human actions as reactions to social situations, and sees the formation of ego as an accumulation of contingencies. Thus, it can be observed that he adopts the existentialist ideology in his philosophy.

²³ Kuki Shūzō, *Kuki Shūzō Zenshū* 九鬼周造全集 3, Iwanamishoten 岩波書店, 1980–1982, pp. 80–81.

²⁴ 「同一律による内面化は事実として邂逅する汝の偶然性に制約された具体的内面化でなければならない。」 Kuki Shūzō, *Kuki Shūzō Zenshū* 九鬼周造全集 2, Iwanamishoten 岩波書店, 1980–1982, p. 252 (Translated by the author).

²⁵ 「弧在する一者はかしこにここに計らずも他者と邂逅する刹那、外なる汝を私の深みに内面化することに全実存の悩みと喜びとを繋ぐものでなければならない。」 Kuki Shūzō, *Kuki Shūzō Zenshū* 九鬼周造全集 2, Iwanamishoten 岩波書店, 1980–1982, p. 258 (Translated by the author).

7. Homeless Philosophers: Kuki Shūzō and Watsuji Tetsurō

Ishihara refers to a famous piece of literary criticism in the beginning of his discussion on *Sanshirō*.²⁶ It is “Literature of the Lost Home 故郷を失った文学” by Kobayashi Hideo 小林秀雄 (1902–1983), published in 1938. Kobayashi expresses that he does not feel like an “*Edokko* 江戸っ子” (an Edo/Tokyo native); rather, he feels the uneasiness of being homeless.

It is as if I cannot understand that I was born in Tokyo. In other words, I have an uneasy feeling that I do not have a home.²⁷

He describes the atmosphere surrounding city inhabitants and states that he cannot find any basis for the formation of ego. Thus, his feelings are similar to those of Kuki, Watsuji, and Sōseki. Young Kobayashi feels positively toward this atmosphere because he believes that it is suitable for the abstract ego to learn Western culture. However, Kuki, Watsuji, and Sōseki identify this as a problem for modern intellectuals. Watsuji advocates *aidagara*, which is formed on the basis of history and climate, and therefore he can be considered a communitarian; he proposes that individuals should adopt the rule of community and rebuild their concrete self. In other words, he tries to recover “our home”. On the other hand, Kuki argues that human beings certainly exist but lack essence; he proposes that individuals should value unexpected meetings and form ego as an accumulation of everyday actions. He approves of the atmosphere of homelessness and contemplates the philosophy of city dwellers.

Martin Heidegger, who influenced both Kuki and Watsuji, also believed that he lived in an era of homelessness (*Heimatlosigkeit*).²⁸ Although a close examination reveals differences in the ideologies of these philosophers, they share the same atmosphere. Heidegger asserts that nostalgia is the fundamental reason for studying philosophy; thus, for Heidegger, philosophy

²⁶ Ishihara, op.cit., Vol. 1, pp.155–157.

²⁷ 「言ってみれば東京に生れながら東京に生まれたという事がどうしても合点出来ない、又言ってみれば自分には故郷というものがない、というような一種不安な感情である」
Kobayashi Hideo 小林秀雄, “Kokyō o Takushita Bungaku” 故郷を失った文学, *Kobayashi Hideo Zensakuhin 4 X eno Tegami* 小林秀雄全作品 4 X への手紙, Shinchōsha 新潮社, 2003, p. 176 (Translated by the author).

²⁸ Martin Heidegger, “Brief über den Humanismus”, *Wegmarken*, Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 9, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976, pp. 337–342.

is a way of going back home.²⁹ However, his European background provided him considerable convenience to study Western philosophy, which the modern Japanese intellectuals lacked. Modern Japanese philosophers are in the atmosphere of homelessness and they cannot find their home by studying the Western-style philosophy. They have to seek new ways and experience the atmosphere of homelessness at home. Today, there are many more city dwellers who live within the atmosphere of homelessness than the era of Kuki and Watsuji. Modern Japanese philosophy might provide them with clues to contemplate and formulate their own guiding principles.

²⁹ Ibid.